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ABSTRACT

It appears obvious that Jimmy Carter's religion became an issue in the 1976 presidential campaign because he chose to emphasize it. Such an emphasis would have seemed reasonable to Carter since a large natural constituency of evangelicals existed, the members of that constituency were becoming involved in politics, their sociocultural situation could have been assumed to prompt them in the direction of bloc voting, and the revitalization of a public interest in religious matters indicated that a religious focus would be acceptable. That Carter's religious emphasis was a conscious political tactic appears likely because of evidence showing that he was aware of the political advantage to be gained by his religion; that a change of emphasis, from minimizing to discussing his religious experiences, occurred in March 1976, shortly after a respected political correspondent published the contention that Carter's success was based on his religious appeal; and that Carter attempted to counterbalance any potential disadvantage that might have accrued from his religious emphasis. An analysis of Carter's statements shows that he established the double standard that it is all right to vote for candidates because of their religion, but unfair to vote against them because of religion. While it may be arguable that Carter's conscious political decision to stress religion was manipulative, it is certain that his cut into the Republican evangelical vote helped him to win the election. (GT)

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ONE'S (RE)BORN EVERY MINUTE;

HOW CARTER SUCKERED OUR VOTES IN 1976

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"I am a born-again Christian Baptist Sunday-school teacher deacon."[1] So said Jimmy Carter in response to a question about his religion at the start of the 1976 campaign. As a result of this and a multitude of other Carter statements about his religion, he became ". . . the first major-party candidate in memory, perhaps in history, who . . . felt obliged to report that he does not have visions or hear voices or converse with God--or expect to become President by heavenly ordination."[2]

Was all that fuss necessary? Probably not. He could have said "I'm a Christian" and let it go at that. Fellow Baptist Harry Truman never had to explain so much. Fellow Evangelical Christian Jerry Ford never had to explain so much. Fellow born-again Christian Ronald Reagan never had to explain so much. The conclusion that Jimmy Carter's religion became an issue because he chose to emphasize it seems inescapable.

But the question remains, why did he make that choice? Two obvious possibilities suggest themselves: 1) he is so commited to his religion that he couldn't help but stress it, or 2) the emphasis was the result of a conscious political decision.

A strong case could be made for the first alternative. Clearly, Jimmy Carter is a deeply religious person. Clearly, he would be uncomfortable if shorn of the possibility of making religiously-tinged statements or enunciating his perceptions without mentioning the religious influence that informed those perceptions. Still, one suspects that if the electorate had been, say, 90% athiest, he would have found a way to avoid or at least minimize his religiosity.

So, without casting doubt upon the depth of his religious commitment, I should like to explore the second possibility, that Jimmy Carter's stress on his religion was the result of a conscious political choice.

It would be nice if either Carter or a member of his staff had ever specifically said that such a decision was made. Since that "smoking gun" does not exist, we shall have to approach the subject more obliquely. First, then, let's ask if such a decision strikes us a justifiable. That is, under what circumstances would a decision to emphasize religion in a presidential campaign seem reasonable? I suggest that, at a minimum, two conditions would have to exist before we would accept such a decision as reasonable: 1) there would have to be a large natural constituency which could be moved by such an appeal, and 2) the climate of the times would have to condition the general public to accept the position. These two conditions, I argue, did exist in 1976.

First, a large natural constituency existed. Carter's own Church, the Southern Baptist Convention, is the biggest Protestant church in the country, numbering nearly 13 million adherents.[3] Besides the Southern Baptists, there are a few millions of other types of Baptists who might perceive themselves as co-religionists with Carter.

But more important than that specific Protestant sect is the fact that Carter is an evangelical, that is, "born again," Christian. How many such people are there? We don't know for sure. Norton and Slosser, authors of one of Carter's campaign biographies, put the number at forty million.[4] Political scientist Albert Menendez suggests the figure is closer to fifty million if you, reasonably enough, include the 18% of the Roman Catholics who consider themselves "born again" Christians.[5] That 40-50 million range, of course, translates into about 20% of the American public. And "If 20% of the voters are evangelicals, this means that sixteen million of the eighty million votes expected to be cast in national elections will be evangelical votes, a bloc of considerable impact."[6] Thus we can conclude, with another Carter biographer, David Kucharsky, that "The most understated demographic reality in the United States is the huge number of

evangelical[s] . . ., Jimmy Carter's natural constituency."[7]

Since many evangelicals had in the past shunned politics, was it reasonable to suspect that 1976 would be different? Fellow evangelical Kucharsky thought so: "The post-Watergate evangelical recovery brought out a feeling long latent that evangelicals should attempt to take a stronger stand in the affairs of the country, especially through political avenues. Several significant movements arose to implement the new zeal . . . A 1975 book by James C. Hefley and Edward E. Plowman, Washington: Christians in the Corridors of Power, . . . fueled new interest. Lingering reservations about possible contamination of the faith by crude and evil political compromisers [were] being overridden by the 1976 sex scandals in Washington and the need they demonstrate[d] for Judeo-Christian influence."[8]

The evangelicals existed in sufficient numbers to be significant, the events of the day were galvanizing them toward political participation, but they could still not be an important bloc if their votes were split. Was it reasonable to assume they might vote together? After all, they had been outside of politics for many years by their own choice; they had been looked down upon and ridiculed socially and culturally at least since the days of the Scopes Monkey Trial. Would evangelicals now have the political sophistication to recognize the power that could accrue from bloc voting? No, that kind of sophisitcation would not be likely from political neophytes. However, independent of their own perceptions of themselves and the political world, the common socio-cultural situation of evangelicals as a group might have been expected to prompt them toward group action.

"Religious bloc voting," Professor Menendez maintains, "seems to occur among groups that are not well assimilated into the patterns of American culture. Individuals who feel that their religious group is secure are not so likely to

vote in a parochial manner. On the other hand, members of groups which have been long excluded from political participation will tend to vote for 'their own' to even up the score."[9] If Menendez is correct, it is possible that evangelicals, if appealed to, might vote to "even up the score."

Thus, in the 1976 campaign, a large natural constituency existed, the members of that constituency were becoming involved in politics, and their socio-cultural situation could be assumed to prompt them in the direction of bloc voting. If Carter recognized and understood these conditions, he might make a conscious political decision to stress his religion . . . especially if such an emphasis would not alienate the general public. In other words, if the climate of the times was ripe for a highly religious candidate, Carter might successfully suggest he was just that candidate.

Certain social and cultural concerns suggest the time was right: a continuing revulsion from the sordidness of Watergate; an accelerating nostalgia craze, which, implicitly at least, included an interest in and appreciation for the values of bygone days;[10] an expanding concern for ecology, a back-to-nature movement which incorporates at least a trace of natural law and natural theology, " . . . the idea that God has placed self-revealing principles in the created universe."[11]

A revivified interest in religious, and quasi-religious, reading materials indicates the degree of acceptibility of a religious focus in 1976. Karl Menninger's Whatever Became of Sin and Chuck Colson's autobiography, Born Again, were among the best sellers. Marabel Morgan's The Total Woman recommended being born again as superior to marriage counseling for wedded bliss. From September 1975 through March 1976 Billy Graham's book, Angels, sold 1.3 million copies and from 1972 through 1975 Kenneth Taylor's The Living Bible, a modern paraphrase of the St. James version, sold 19 million copies.[12]

This revitalization of an interest in religious and spiritual matters is

probably best understood as part of a larger movement, a " . . . revolt against Reason that has been gaining momentum since the early '60's. It is a return to Faith at a moment when all the rational solutions appear to have produced irrational results."[13] The distrust of reason that surfaced so violently in the Far Right and New Left political forces became, in the '70's, religious fervor. As the Leftists abandoned activist politics to become Jesus freaks and Moonies and Eastern contemplatives, the middle class increasingly turned toward evangelicalism. Moreover, those who did not make that move felt betrayed by " . . . the pessimism and moral anarchy . . . and perplexed by the consequences of their own lack of personal faith."[14] Having encountered liberation and a freer life style, Americans nostalgically looked back upon a happier day when the shared cultural values and religious faiths provided cushions against hardships. Into this belief vacuum steps Mr. Carter, taking over a constituency" . . . that longs for something it has lost and thinks he represents."[15]

No wonder, then, that an early Time-Yankelovich poll found that 32% of the voters perceived Carter's religion to be an asset, against 8% who saw it as a liability.[16] No wonder Carter felt free to tell the American people, "We ought to make our own societal structure a better demonstration of what Christ is,"[17] and to contend " . . . that his faith gives him an 'inner assurance,' honesty and compassion that are so badly needed in the White House."[18] The people of America were primed for both the message and the messenger.

Assuming that the conditions were conducive to a decision to stress religion in 1976, let's turn our attention to the second major question, was the religious emphasis a conscious tactic? Here we ought, I should think, to search for three kinds of evidence--1) indications of awareness of the potential advantage; 2) any change toward greater reliance upon religion, either in comparison to other campaigns or at any point within this one campaign; and 3) any

attempt to counter-balance the potential damage amongst non-believers.

First, were there indications of Carter's being aware of the potential advantage which might accrue to him because of his religion? The answer is a clear yes. As early as May 13, 1975, Robert Shogan asked him if his Southern Baptist background might help him with the burgeoning evangelical movement. "It was clear . . . that he had thought about the subject. He said the evangelical movement now included about 40 million persons, people like himself ' who are deeply commited to establishing government as moralistic and decent.'"[19]

Given Carter's earlier public pronouncements, there was no surprise when, during the New Hampshire primary, Kathy Starbuck asked him to describe his political base and he included his co-religionists on the list, along with governors, farmers, engineers, scientists, and former classmates.[20] It will be noted, of course, that the list is composed of people who are like him in some way, and that the biggest group sharing something with him are the evangelicals.

This awareness of religious advantage, according to Shrum, extended to substantive positions. He contends that during the Pennsylvania primary Carter told his staff, " . . . I don't want any more statements on the Middle East or Lebanon. Jackson has all the Jews anyway. It doesn't matter how far I go. I don't get over four percent of the Jewish vote anyway, so forget it. We get the Christians."[21]

The Carter camp denied all of Shrum's allegations, but it is obvious that they were aware of their religious advantage. And even if the candidate himself did not make overt overtures for the religious note, other of his campaigners were less constrained. For instance, his aunt, Emily Dolvin, told a Maryland audience, "If all you Baptists vote for him, he'll get in there because there are more Baptists than anyone. Get all those Baptists out there on Tuesday and

vote."[22]

But that was an aunt, who may have been acting entirely on her own. Closer to the center of power in the campaign, however, Rosalynn Carter addressed a Baltimore congregation: "Another thing I want you to know about my husband is that he's a Christian man. He has told me many times that he spent more time on his knees, as governor of Georgia, than in all the rest of his life put together. We need your help, so that with your help and the help of our Lord Jesus Christ, Jimmy Carter can be a great President of these United States."[23]

Carter seems to have left it to others close to him to make overt appeals of this kind, and concentrated his own efforts on appeals of a more general nature which reflected the traditional American pattern of moral concerns. Carter included these subtle appeals to faith and decency from the very beginning. For example, when Carter announced his candidacy at a National Press Club luncheon in December of 1974 he said, "It is time for us to reaffirm and to strengthen our ethical and spiritual and political beliefs."[24]

The Carter staff did not necessarily share his religious enthusiasm. As a matter of fact, they sometimes became downright irreverent about it, as when they designated their own status according to the point at which they joined the campaign--pre-1972 followers were "The Chosen," pre-New Hampshire helpers were "The Anointed," and post-New Hampshire recruits were "The Converted."[25] All, of course, in the service of "J.C."

The media, too, had some fun with the Carter religious emphasis. "Cartoonist John Lawing of the National Courier showed a smiling Jimmy Carter behind a pulpit emblazoned with the presidential seal saying to reporters, 'And now as we close the press conference I'm going to ask Jody Powell to hum 'Amazing Grace' while those of you who want to repent . . .'"[26]

Does all of this prove that the stress on religion was a conscious tactic? No, but it demonstrates that Carter was aware of the potential advantage to be

gained from his religion, the first necessary component toward making such a conscious decision.

We might be more willing to believe the religious emphasis was a political tactic if we could find a point at which the emphasis either started or became more pronounced. Since there was always a religious component, in this and in his earlier campaigns, we are reduced to searching for a change of emphasis.

That change of emphasis is easy to spot. On March 23, 1976, Jimmy Carter got another question about his religion while speaking to a small group at the house of a North Carolina supporter. But instead of giving his usual short reply he launched into a detailed description of his religious beliefs and experiences, including the famous "born again" event. Why did he change the nature of his response on that night? Did it just "happen" or was it a conscious decision? Kenneth Briggs reports that Carter told him the decision to do so came after "prayerful thought,"[27] but Kucharsky claims that there had been a staff debate " . . . over whether to leave well enough alone."[28]

That this reply signaled a conscious and significant change can be demonstrated by the fact that Carter's autobiography, Why Not the Best?, does not include a description of the "born again" episode, which, as Mazlish and Diamond point out, is "An odd omission for such a careful person."[29]

Why the change? Did it result from a staff debate or from "prayerful thought?" Or maybe both? Let's look at a sequential correlation that has not been mentioned yet.

On March 21 Richard Reeves published an article in New York magazine in which he contended that Carter's success was based upon his religious appeal.[30] On March 23 Carter quit giving short defensive answers about his religion and started openly discussing it, while continuing to ascribe the reason for his talking as mere response to the questions of reporters and the electorate.

While recognizing that a sequential correlation does not prove causality, I find this one persuasive. We know that Reeves is a respected political correspondent. We know that Carter read the article. We know the article said the religious appeal was the key to Carter's political success. We know the Carter staff debated whether to escalate the religious emphasis. We know that Carter had de-emphasized the "born again" aspect earlier, even omitting it from his autobiography. Yet several days after the Reeves article was published Carter reversed his usual procedure and gave detailed responses about the most intimate details of his private religious life. If you want to believe that all this was happenstance you may. I believe it demonstrates that Carter's escalation of the religious emphasis was a consciously calculated political tactic. But it was not a foolproof one, so I also believe Carter when he says the decision was made as a result of prayerful thought. He did not lie; he just did not tell the full truth.

Being a careful and conservative politician, Carter also made some moves to counter-balance any potential disadvantage that might accrue from the decision. One such move I've already mentioned--he continued the charade that he only talked religion in response to questions. That clearly was untrue--he emphasized his religion in his basic stump speech and included it in almost every speech unless he thought it would hurt him. Helen Dudar writes, "On the road, Carter mentions God where appropriate--at a dinner of supporters in Florida, for example, but not before the Harvard-Radcliffe Democratic club where the Diety's standing may be shaky."[31]

Another tactic Carter used was to follow the Kennedy syndrome of complaining about the unfairness of the religious emphasis, thereby continuing to give it attention. For instance, talking to the Jewish Educational Institute in

Elizabeth, New Jersey, he said, "One of the major problems that I have faced in this election is because of my own religious beliefs."[32] And, he added, ". . . this is a country where anyone's own religious beliefs should not be a matter of prejudice or concern . . ."[33] Square that last statement, if you can, with this earlier one he made right after escalating the religious issue in North Carolina: "If there are those who don't want to vote for me because I'm a deeply committed Christian, I believe they should vote for someone else."[34]

Note the sequence. First he says it is okay to vote against him for religious reasons (the unstated corollary, of course, being that it is okay to vote for him for religious reasons). Then he denies that one should oppose another for religious reasons. The net result seems to be that to vote for somebody because of their religion is alright; to vote against them because of religion is unfair.

Incidentally, the idea that reporters were over-stressing religion and being unfair about it just does not seem to be borne out, at least in the New York Times. The Times coverage of Carter began with a Carter op-ed statement on September 5, 1975,[35] yet it was not until a Dec. 14 article in the Magazine[36] that Carter's religion was mentioned, and then it was so de-emphasized that no mention was made of his denomination. Rather, emphasis was placed upon Carter's having taken a position against segregation in the Church.[37] The significance of religion to Carter's life was not examined despite the quoted revelation that his aides had responded to the "What makes him run?" question with one word: "religion."[38] A month later the public learned that Carter was a Deacon of his Church,[39] although they still had not been told which denomination he belonged to.

And even after Carter escalated the religious issue in March, the big guns at the Times hardly could be said to have been unfair to him. In April

Anthony Lewis testified, ". . . he shows no sign of zealotry."[40] In May, James Reston reported, "Already some of his opponents are suggesting privately that he is a 'religious fanatic,' who thinks he is an important instrument of 'the Lord's work,' but there is no evidence to support this thesis."[41] And in June, William V. Shannon wrote, "The religious issue raised against Jimmy Carter says more about the people raising it than it does about him."[42] I don't know where Carter and these Times reporters were discovering this anti-Carter religious vendetta, but it certainly was not on the pages of the New York Times.

You will have noticed, of course, the clear double standard that has been established. One mustn't cast an anti-religious vote because religion is a private affair. But it is right to vote pro-religion because Godliness in Washington would be a good thing. Carter told a Buffalo, New York audience, "I believe I can be a better President because of my faith,"[43] but no one is allowed to say he might be a worse President because of his faith or they will be accused of dragging in the bogus religious issue. It won't wash. Either religion is relevant or it is irrelevant; it can not be relevant if pro-, irrelevant if anti-. However, Carter was able to structure that kind of dichotomy by his complaints that the stressing of his religion was unfair while he continued to emphasize it.

The most obvious of Carter's attempts to counter-balance the potential disadvantage of his religious emphasis was the ill-fated Playboy interview. It can not be proven, of course, that Carter accepted the interview in order to reach the audience put off by his piety, or that he used phrases like "shack up" and "screw" in an attempt to seem like a "regular guy" to the Playboy readership. But, as William Safire put it, ". . .Mr. Carter is the only politician who talks dirty in public to cover up the fact that he talks clean in private."[44] The scheme backfired. Carter was ahead in the polls by

over ten points when the Playboy story broke on a Monday . . . by that Wednesday night Caddell's polling showed Carter to have fallen slightly behind Ford.[45] That it backfired in no way detracts from the fact that Carter seemed to by trying to counter-balance the potential disadvantage of stressing his religion.

Because Carter was aware of the potential advantage of emphasizing his religion, because he escalated the religious factor after he discovered it was a hit with the electorate, because he made attempts to mollify those turned off by his religion, I conclude that the decision to stress religion was a conscious political decision.

Was that manipulative? Did Carter try to "sucker" our votes? I think so, but I don't insist that you agree.

I would insist, however, that you agree that his religion helped him win the election. Compare, for instance, Professor Menendez's statistics on 1968 and 1976. Humphrey had 6.7 million votes more than Nixon from non-evangelicals but Nixon had 7.2 million more votes amongst evangelicals and won the election by ½ million votes. Carter didn't do as well with the Humphrey constituency, beating Ford by about five million among those people. But he cut into the Republican evangelical vote sufficiently that Ford only beat him by 3.2 million in that stronghold. The result, obviously, was a nearly two million vote margin--and the Presidency--for James Earl Carter, the "born-again Christian Baptist Sunday-school teacher deacon" . . . and one of the slickest politicians to enter the "bully pulpit" in many a decade.

Footnotes

1. Peter Goldman, "Sizing up Carter," Newsweek, Sept. 13, 1976, p. 49.

2. Ibid.

3. Gus Tyler, "The Rise of Jimmy Carter," The New Leader, May 10, 1976, p. 14.

4. Howard Norton and Bob Slosser. The Miracle of Jimmy Carter. Plainfield, N.J.: Logos International, 1976, p. 10.

5. Albert J. Menendez. Religion at the Polls. Philadelphia: The Westminister Press, 1977, p. 197.

6. Ibid., p. 139.

7. David Kucharsky. The Man From Plains: The Mind and Spirit of Jimmy Carter. New York: Harper and Row, 1976, p. 95.

8. Ibid., p. 77.

9. Menendez, op. cit., p. 167.

10. Kucharsky, op. cit., p. 85.

11. Ibid., p. 87.

12. Kenneth A. Briggs, "Carter's Evangelism Putting Religion Into Politics for First Time Since '60," New York Times, April 11, 1976, p. 41.

13. Tyler, op. cit., p. 14.

14. James Reston, "What Makes Jimmy Win?," New York Times, May 30, 1976, p. 15E.

15. Ibid.

16. Menendez, op. cit., p. 104.

17. Douglas E. Kneeland, "Carter Speaks to Sunday School Class on Need for Love, Justice and Humility," New York Times, July 19, 1976, p. 14.

18. "The Southern Baptists--Who They Are, What They Believe," U.S. News and World Report, July 19, 1976, p. 26.

19. Robert Shogan. Promises to Keep; Carter's First Hundred Days. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1977, p. 35.

20. Kathy Starbuck, "Mr. Sincere Runs for President," The New Leader, March 17, 1976, p. 12.

21. Martin Schram. Running for President; A Journal of the Carter Campaign. New York: Kangaroo (Pocket Books), 1977, p. 150.

22. Menendez, op. cit., p. 119.

23. Norton and Slosser, op. cit., pp. 99-100.

24. Kucharsky, op. cit., p. 120

25. Norton and Slosser, op. cit., p. 57.

26. James Hefley and Marti Hefley. The Church that Produced a President. New York: Wyden Books, 1977.

27. Briggs, op. cit., p. 41.

28. Kucharsky, op. cit., p. 45.

29. Bruce Mazlish and Edwin Diamond, "Thrice-Born," New York, Aug. 30, 1976, p. 26.

30. Richard Reeves, "Carter's Secret," New York, 9 (March 21, 1976) 28-30.

31. Helen Dudar, "Jimmy Carter Has Good Teeth and Is Always on Time," Esquire, April, 1976, p. 122.

32. Charles Mohr, "Carter Gets an Ovation After Assuring Jews in Jersey on His Religious Views," New York Times, June 7, 1976, p. 22.

33. Ibid.

34. Briggs, op. cit., p. 41.

35. Jimmy Carter, "Why I Am Running," New York Times, Sept. 5, 1975, p. 29.

36. Patrick Anderson, "Peanut Farmer for President," New York Times Magazine, Dec. 14, 1975, pp. 15ff.

37. Ibid., pp. 71, 76.

38. Ibid., p. 70

39. Tom Wicker, "Mr. Carter's Formula," New York Times, Jan. 23, 1976, p. 31.

40. Anthony Lewis, "Reading Jimmy Carter," New York Times, April 1, 1976, p. 31.

41. James Reston, "Politics and Religion," New York Times, May 2, 1976, p. 15E.

42. Wm. Shannon, "The Religious Issue," New York Times, June 17, 1976, p. 35.

43. Briggs, op. cit., p. 41.

44. Wm. Safire, "The Weirdness Factor," New York Times, Sept. 20, 1976, p. 41.

45. Schram, op. cit., p. 337.

46. Menendez, op. cit., p. 198.